Nicodemus, Displaced

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on John 3:1-17
on March 1, 2026, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

I'm unashamedly biased and clearly showing my age here, but I do believe the TV show, *The West Wing*, to be among the very best of all television's medium has to offer. The show's storyline arcs in and through, you guessed it, the West Wing, chronicling all the staff and swirl around the presidency. In one classic scene, White House chief of staff Leo McGarry reaches out to Josh Lyman, his deputy and right-hand guy. Josh has been struggling with PTSD following a terrible shooting at an event with the president. Leo tells Josh a parable: *This guy's walking down the street when he falls down a hole. The walls are so steep, he can't get out. A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, "Hey, you! Can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription and throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts, "Father, I'm down in this hole. Can you help me out?" The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole, and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey, Joe, it's me! Can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here." The friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."*[1]

That's what we long for when we're in a hard stretch, isn't it? We want to feel seen, like our heartache isn't ours to bear alone. The companionship of a "me too," of a friend willing to join us in the dark hole to accompany us on the way out changes everything. But what of the displacement of isolation when we're in the bad place, in the doubt, in the heartache, in the deep

[1] Aaron Sorkin and Peter Parnell, writers, and Thomas Schlamme, director, "Noel," *The West Wing*, Season 2, Episode 10, December 20, 2000.

sadness – and can't bring ourselves to ask for help? What do we do when the absence of certainty, of a plan or a purpose, of belief dislocates us from one another and even ourselves?

II.

I doubt Nicodemus would call it "displacement" that carried him from his home under the cover of darkness to find Jesus, but all the signs were there. You see, he's a Pharisee, one of the established religious leaders who is widely respected, in part for his confidence about what he knows. He's the guy with all the education, the plan, the answers. The know-it-all-and-lets-you-know-it-too guy that's as straight-laced, Type A, Enneagram 1 as they come. Probably even irons his jeans. No one would expect someone like Nicodemus to be curious about something new, or disquieted by something he doesn't understand.

"Rabbi, *we know* you're a teacher sent from God," was Nicodemus' opening line, prioritizing what he knew, "for what you do would be impossible apart from God." But surely he didn't expect Jesus's response: "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." *Born from above?*, Nicodemus wonders. *As in, childbirth all over again? As a man and not a baby? How can this happen?* You can practically hear in those questions his literalist mind trying to make sense of what had to feel nonsensical. Jesus adds another layer of metaphor – "the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear it, but you do not know where it comes or goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus's feeble attempts to understand lie in the last words we hear from him: "how can this be?"

Perhaps Nicodemus was halfway down into that hole in his mind, when Jesus then talks about belief. Another question: "if I have told you about

earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" Deeper, lower, Nicodemus sinks into bewilderment and isolation.

I have to imagine Nicodemus would be utterly dumbfounded if he knew that Jesus' next words would unfold through the centuries as some of the most certain claims of the Christian faith. Jesus says this: "For God loved the world – *the cosmos* – in such a way that God gave God's Son, so that everyone who believes in him – or *everyone who treasures*, *everyone who gives their heart over to Jesus without reservation*, *everyone who invests in Jesus with their love* — won't perish or end, but rather will have life of the ages – *life of new birth*, *life everlasting*. *The Message* translation continues: "God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. Rather, God came to help, to put the world right again."[2]

Barbara Brown Taylor calls this "the place where human knowing runs out."[3] For a man who entered the conversation speaking of what he knows, only to hear Jesus remind him of what he *doesn't*, surely Nicodemus must have been utterly confounded. *Believe?* Might as well be a prescription or a prayer written and tossed down into the hole of unknowing.

III.

Let's talk about beliefs for a minute here. Inside or outside of faith, beliefs in general hold great power. Beliefs form opinions and motivate actions. Beliefs knit people together and tear them apart. Beliefs create worlds and worldviews, beliefs start wars and wind their way to reconciliation. There is power, *great* power, in belief.

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[2] John 3:17, *The Message*
[3] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others.*

Among the adults in the room who grew up in church, something tells me that many of us grew up learning similar lessons about the Christian life and what it means to believe. Somewhere along the line – from pastors or preachers, Sunday School teachers or mentors, parents or friends – we were taught that to be a Christian, one must understand a thing or two about the Bible: what it says, and what it means. From this biblical foundation came truths to affirm and stories to learn: about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, the human condition, sin and salvation, grace, baptism, the church, evangelism, the end times, right through that systematic theology, all of it.

But hinging on all of this was the question: *do you believe?*

Rarely was that question even unpacked! *Do you believe?* What does that even mean? *Do you believe* – meaning, do you interpret these commitments and evidence presented as fact? Do you accept the propositions as they're taught to you, even if they don't line up with what you read or feel or experience? Do you adhere completely to the purity of denominational creed or inherited doctrine? Can you whittle down the capaciousness of your opinions and feelings and dreams and stories of faith into something pithy enough to fit on a bumper sticker? Can you memorize the sinner's prayer and pray it, or the Apostle's Creed and recite it? And once you know all these things, can you defend them?

Christian theologian N. T. Wright wrote a little book about resurrection called *Surprised by Hope*, in which he examines the question: *how do we know what we know?* From the Enlightenment to now, he tracks this modern pathway of knowing for those of us living in the Western world, a knowing

that prioritizes evidence and science over mystery and wonder. As he says, "If you can't see it, touch it, weigh it, or measure it, it isn't true or real."[4]

But if belief is narrowly defined by knowing, every time we encounter doubt, we spiral. If belief is only in what we can quantify, every time we encounter mystery, we fall. If belief is only in what we can recite, every time we encounter actions that directly contract beliefs, we dislocate. If the sameness of thought is all that holds us together, every difference, every question, every outlier can be perceived as a threat. If belief is only in what we can touch with our hands and see with our eyes, every time we cannot see or touch or hear or feel, we experience the kind of displacement that leaves us at the bottom of a pit. "For blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

IV.

One of the most sacred gifts of my work is to sit with you in these dislocated places and to hear the questions that wake you up at night and stir in your spirits all day. Over these past months, there have been a number. One of you slipped over to the church house, away from questioning eyes and curious ears, with a question, "I'm thinking about becoming a member, but would I have to be absolutely certain in my beliefs first?" Another of you has experienced years of the churn in your gut, certain that a particular belief has displaced you from community. "Would this deeply-held belief of mine still qualify me for belonging?" Still another has considered a call to ministry but wondered, "do I have to believe all the things *you* believe in order to be a pastor?" And another, "are you confident that the church shares a belief I consider to be most important?" The winds blow where they choose, you see.

[4] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p69.

Over and over, I hear the questions whispered beneath all these words, as if echoing from the bottom of the pit: *How can these things be? How can I believe when I don't know? How can I trust what I can't see? I believe, help then my unbelief.*

"The problem is not that belief is *wrong,"* writer Debie Thomas says, "it's that belief divorced from our enfleshed and storied lives is *not enough*." She continues: "Because assenting to a set of propositions cannot foster the deep, all-encompassing relationship we desire to have with God. It cannot immerse us in a reality rich and textured enough for all our ideas, thoughts, questions, and hopes. If anything, intellectual assent is a smokescreen. A distraction. A thin, dissatisfying substitute for something much larger and more wonderful."[5]

Now given how firmly our tradition has tied "belief" with "thought," how tightly we've bound belief as an activity of the mind, it might shock you to learn that the word "believe" in our English language comes from *belieben*, the German word for "love."[6] And in Greek, "believe" simply means, "to give one's heart to."[7] "Thus," as writer Kathleen Norris notes, "if we can determine what it is we give our heart to, then we will know what it is we believe."[8]

When I first learned this, it was as if all the lights in the world flooded every shadowy place of my doubt and my fear. We don't just believe what we know, we believe what we love! Belief isn't an exercise of the mind, rather it's an activity of the heart! And it's confirmed right there on the lips of Jesus: "for God so <u>loved</u> the entirety of creation that God gave to the world the one most beloved – God's only son – so that all who treasure Jesus, who invest in

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[5] Debie Thomas, *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity*, p65.
[6] Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, p116.
[7] Kathleen Norris, "Belief, Doubt, and Sacred Ambiguity," *Amazing Grace*, p62.
[8] Ibid.

Jesus with their love, won't end at the end, but will have life of the ages, life of new birth!"

You know, when I'm asked what our church believes about this thing or that, I chuckle in Baptist and describe how we're not of one mind, but we are striving to be of one heart. "My weight is my love," you see.[9] Here, together, we're pressing the gravity of our love toward Jesus: who he is and who he loves and how he treasures every single person, place, and thing in this world. Here, together, our love propels our knowing. Here, together, when I can't believe, the church believes for me… and when you can't believe, the church believes for you. Here, together, we jump down in the dark places with each other when needed, because someone has always been down there before, and they know the way out.

V.

As the story goes, there was a heated exchange between a seminarian and an Orthodox theologian, who had offered a lecture at Yale Divinity School on the history of the Christian creeds. That student was stirred up as seminary students often are, and asked, "what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the Creed?" To which the theologian replied, "well, you just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart."[10]

Friends, my prayer for you is that in the displaced parts of your beliefs, when you doubt or wonder or worry or fear, you remember what you can learn and thus know by heart. You find your place by stretching toward the

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[9] Quote from Augustine on the cover of today's worship guide: "My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me." As I described this in the Invitation to Worship, the objects of our affection pull us like gravity. If we love for power, for influence, for aggression, for distraction, we'll be pulled towards them. If we love for connection, for community, for peace, for goodness, we'll be pulled towards them.
[10] Norris, p65.

One whose place is already with you. And there you'll find that new life feels like a gentle breeze, an outstretched hand, a whole heart. Amen!